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Are nursing students going to behave as consumers?

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Introduction

The 2017 academic year marked the inauguration of the policy to abolish the NHS bursary in BSc. pre-registration nursing courses. In its place, students are given access to loan and standard student support system through the Student Loans Company to cover the cost of their tuition fees and means-tested living costs (Glasper, 2016). In my opinion, the policy has almost entirely dissipated the unique selling point of attracting the rich demography into nursing training. In consequence, the NHS could be deprived of its novelty of 'melting pot' of richness and diversity of the workforce in the coming years. More importantly, there is increasing risk that the policy will change the behaviour of nursing students. Why did the government implement this drastic policy?

Outcry

Like a moth to a flame, the NHS bursary attracted students to the pre-registration nursing programmes. However, its abolition provoked anger among students, nursing professionals, politicians, and the public leading to series of demonstrations in England. It has been suggested that the policy is a cost cutting exercise to safeguard the government's austerity plan (Hamilton, 2016). Concerns that the policy will lead to shortfall in recruiting nursing students (Conlon and Ladher, 2015) has indeed come true. Statistical figures from UCAS suggests that interest in nursing-related courses in England slumped by 23 percent before the 2017 academic year (Alstrup, 2017).

Proponents for the abolition of the bursary argue that it was paltry and inflexible, and that the student loan will offer flexibility and boost students' expendable income (Glasper 2016; Kay 2016). Others have also argued that the policy is essentially pragmatic. Nursing, the argument goes, is a career with reasonable salaries and prospects, therefore the loan system

is a worthwhile lifetime investment (Kay, 2016). I partially agree with this analysis. A recent review put nursing in the top half of the highest median earnings, five years after graduation (Britton, 2017). But this does not preclude the possibility of today's nursing students behaving as consumers.

Nursing students as consumers

Can universities charge tuition fees and still expect nursing students not to have any desire to change the current status quo? I can envisage scenarios where students express strong opinions as tuition-paying students and refuse to undertake certain tasks they perceive as condescending at clinical placements. In this situation, they would be exercising the perceived privileges conferred to them as consumers in a culture that values individual liberty. But many may perceive such behaviour as profoundly egotistical and rebellious that has no place in the nursing profession.

Whilst acting as consumers may be an aspiration for many, the expectations to conform to the Trust or placement policies will quash such dreams. Besides, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code (2015) of professional standards will continue to shape and reinforce nursing students' behaviours. Ironically, the NMC illuminates that "this Code reflects the world in which we live and work today". In my opinion, this statement is ambiguous and needs clarification. The reality of today's nursing students is that they are no longer receiving bursary. Instead, they are paying a whopping £9000 tuition fees for their education. Moreover, unlike many conventional university courses, pre-registration nursing students spend 50 percent of the course hours in clinical areas. Commuting to these places cost time and money. The NHS student bursary was thus, students' main subsistent income. So, the

conundrum is to have conditions that reflect their world. The legitimate questions that certainly need to be asked are: Should nursing programmes be redesigned to consider the recent dramatic changes in course funding? Should students only work weekdays and normal working hours when in clinical placements to allow them to toil elsewhere to supplement their paltry incomes?

But students are not consumers

If we accept the argument that nursing students are consumers, then nursing colleges and clinical areas ought to be providing services for them. But, I do not believe that paying tuition fees is equivalent to say, buying a laptop or Television from a high street shop that automatically elevates buyers to consumer status thus, making them eligible to return their products, get refund or have access to after sales service. The opposite is true in higher education. Once students quit a nursing course, they cannot get tuition fees refund instead, they would be expected to refund any accrued student loans. Moreover, it is prudent for nursing students to unequivocally understand that tuition fees do not automatically mean that they are 'paying' to get degrees. In academic standings, degrees are 'awarded' after meeting the academic requirements, they are not 'paid' for. The tuition fees only grant students access to university facilities- lecturers, personal tutors, library, computers, databases, lecture theatres, simulation centres, clinical placements, and so on. In return, students are required to sufficiently engage with the university system to be awarded degrees after meeting requirements – degrees are not given on a silver platter. Attending university supplies a close analogy to paying to go to the gym to lose weight. It requires self-discipline to meet targets. Same applies to, studying for a degree at the university.

Marketisation

Some commentators have speculated that tuition fees will permit universities to treat nursing programmes as profit making businesses (Osborne, 2016). I sympathise with this view. Take for example, the college of nursing I work with. The importance of personal tutoring is vehemently sold to all academics to enhance student experience and maximise their learning potentials. Whilst this is partially motivated by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to improve high quality teaching, I suspect that the real motive behind the strategy is the anxiety that high attrition rate of students will cost the university millions of pounds. I dare argue that it is financial motives driving these marketing strategies at the nursing colleges.

Mollycoddling

Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that introduction of tuition fees has led to of marketisation of nursing courses and mollycoddling of students. For example, it was made bare from a recent brief from my own college of nursing that the college has a very high student appeal rate, and the directive was for lecturers to be flexible in granting student requests for extensions of coursework. Furthermore, lecturers have been advised to use terminology such as 'non-engagement' instead of 'non-attendance' to lectures. The semantics is clear, that the onus of responsibility is on the university lecturers not the students as learners. It appears to me that the college has developed an insatiable appetite for satisfying its student consumers. Moreover, smart customer communications have been formulated to satisfy the ever-increasing demanding student consumer in the wake of introduction of tuition fees in nursing education. It is not surprising that these changes are causing pandemonium and burnout among lecturers.

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